

Hear ye! Hear ye!: Stories, fake news and information

By Barbara Combes

Snapshot

In a companion article to her excellent keynote at our 2018 conference on Fake News Barbara Combes explores the term Fake News in a changing world and in particular what it means for our profession and our work with young people.

While the term fake news is a *Trumpism* and a product of the current US President's repertoire, the idea of false information and disinformation has been around for a long time, especially in school libraries and when considering the Internet. Most people are familiar with the following sites to teach students how to recognise information that is false or fake or partially true. Examples include:

- [The Pacific Northwest Tree Octopus](#)
- [All about explorers](#)
- [Dihydrogen Monoxide](#)
- [California's Velcro crop under challenge](#)
- [Buy dehydrated water](#)

However, the term fake news in today's terms means something different, because it has been used to describe information that has been provided by reputable news outlets, journalists and institutions that have had credibility in the past. This use of language has also been circulated widely using social media on the Internet. This use of the Internet as a means of dissemination has led to a rapid change in how we use, respond to and interact with the term fake news. It has become part of society's understanding of what news/information is and this has had major repercussions on how the general public views all news services.

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Social beliefs and assumptions

This reaction to fake news and how we use language is a direct result of two major characteristics of information that is spread using the Internet and some interesting social beliefs and assumptions already in place before Trump came to be President. These beliefs include:

- the WWW/Internet (people generally confuse the WWW which is what we are searching and the Internet which is much larger) contains all information – not true;
- the WWW/Internet is a one-stop-shop for all information – not true;
- everyone can find the information they need, interpret and use it – not true;
- all information on the WWW/Internet is free – definitely not true; and
- all information on the WWW/Internet is good information – definitely not true.

the WWW/Internet is a one-stop-shop for all information – not true

Many of these beliefs still have great resonance across all levels of society and have come about because information on the WWW/Internet is widely available to anyone; anyone can be an expert/famous; and anyone can publish in this medium. Hence we have information,

misinformation, disinformation and false information; and fake news is no exception. Fake news can be counterfeit, a forgery or a sham (Oxford Dictionary, 2018). It is also described as fraudulent, a deceptive act and artificial or not real (Collins Dictionary, 2018). News commentators also use words such as rumour, innuendo, titillation, untruthful and not to be trusted (ABC, 2018).

Prior to the advent of the WWW/Internet news and the Fourth Estate (investigative journalism) were usually associated with truth, facts and research. So the term fake news is a contradiction of terms if news is meant to be accurate and true. Print media and how we react

to information was investigated in the 1970s by Brenda Dervin. She found that we perceive only 'objective' information as valuable; expect that objective information can be transmitted out of context; and feel that the more information we have is better. As most information on the Internet is still mainly in text, we bring these beliefs with us to the new medium. Since the technology and its authority are an integral part of this new landscape, the WWW/Internet have also come to be regarded as formal information sources by users, thus leading to the assumption that information found using these delivery modes is somehow more authoritative, valuable and true (Combes, 2004).

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Two characteristics of information on the WWW/Internet

There are two characteristics that determine how we perceive information delivered by the WWW/Internet. Characteristic 1 is that information delivered by this mode is **very solid**:

- text is perceived as having authority and value – traditional perception;
- information may appear in multiple locations and publications, in different formats and via different delivery modes = more authority/must be true/good;
- how we publish on the Web – confusion between information, entertainment and advertising;
- greater longevity – recirculated/regurgitated; and
- almost impossible to delete – due to the nature of the Web (eg. Wayback Machine - <http://www.wayback.com/>).
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In complete contrast and at the same time, information on the WWW/Internet is **incredibly fluid**:

- information can be copied, pasted, slightly altered and disseminated widely – like Chinese whispers;
- appears in a variety of formats and via different delivery modes – formal, abridged,

informal/social contexts;

- often picked up by followers who transmit it around the landscape; and
- recirculated/regurgitated – continues to be alive, one set of users leaves and another logs on.

Either you pay for information or you become the information product.

Other technologies also foster the growth of fake news. Twitter and RSS Feeds mean limited information is transmitted in short bursts and out of context. The nature of the technology means that the information is picked up and transmitted around the WWW/Internet, often undergoing slight changes on the way. Youtube videos suffer from a

similar fate and can be easily manipulated (Edevane, 2018) or users can be manipulated when the technology is used for political purposes (Silverman, 2018). Of course the information sold to paying clients by the huge information-gathering giants such as Google, Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft and Apple have been the topic of much discussion since the Cambridge Analytica scandal (Funke, 2018). Information is often freely available on the WWW/Internet, but it is not free. It is not copyright free and there is always a cost to the user. Either you pay for information or you become the information product.

Effects on society

The idea that news is fake has affected how we as a society view all types of news media. A recent research report from MIT (Vosoughi et al, 2018; Reneau, 2018) indicates that it is the human element in the online environment that spreads fake news rather than the technology. It would appear that we humans love to be titillated; like gossip, innuendo and rumour; and spread fake news rather than robots on the WWW/Internet. The way information behaves in the online medium and how we humans perceive and spread fake news has led to a change in the amount of trust we put in all news outlets including print. The *2018 Edelman Trust Barometer Global Report* (Edelman, 2018) found that:

63% - the average person does not know how to tell good journalism from rumour or falsehoods

- trust in media has fallen to -37 in the USA and -10 in Australia;
- 59% in the USA believe the government is the most broken;
- 7 in 10 people worry about fake news being used as a weapon;
- 66% believe news organisations are more interested in attracting large audiences;
- 65% believe they sacrifice accuracy to be the first to break a story;
- 63% - the average person does not know how to tell good journalism from rumour or falsehoods; and
- 59% - it is becoming harder to tell if a piece of news was produced by a respected media organisation.

Conclusion and what does this mean for schools

Looking at the findings of these two studies indicates that we need to educate our students about the online environment and the effect it has on information reliability and dissemination. Our students need to understand that how we use the medium is actually part of the problem

... to equip our students with the knowledge and skills to be able to find and evaluate information is a primary goal ...

and it can have far reaching effects on how society is informed and by whom. There is a fine line between fake news and political propaganda or alternative facts. We have fake news because the information landscape today is incredibly complex; consists of

multiple perspectives from multiple authors (anyone can publish); enables rapid dissemination of information that is often decontextualized or out of context and it is easy to manipulate or alter. To become informed today is actually much harder than pre-Internet, even though we have more information available and at our finger tips. The big question is can we find and sift out the good information from the fake. In an Information Age where our understandings are constantly changing, to equip our students with the knowledge and skills to be able to find and evaluate information is a primary goal of education and a major role for the information specialists in the library.

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